



January 14, 2004

To Whom It May Concern,

As chair of the Music Department at Sonoma State University, I am most happy to write this letter on behalf of Michael Smolens who has served on SSU's adjunct music faculty this past year as classroom and studio instructor in Jazz Piano. I first became acquainted with Mr. Smolens a year ago last fall when he conducted a highly successful guest artist workshop for our Music majors on the Art of Practicing. Last September, he performed with the Music Department's highly regarded jazz faculty—Mel Graves, bass; Randy Vincent, guitar; George Marsh, drums and percussion; Pete Estabarook, trumpet; Charlie McCarthy, saxophones and Al Bent, trombone—in their annual fall jazz concert.

I'd have to first mention the high caliber and versatility of Mr. Smolens' musicianship. His ear and interpretation skills are considerable, his musical instincts very strong and marked by many years of experience playing in a wide range of styles and circumstances. Mr. Smolens' musical interests extend far beyond what traditionally falls within the stylistic borders of jazz. He joins other of the more interesting and original musicians and composers of his generation whose music is equally compatible in categories such as 'world music' and 'serious classical composition.'

A prodigious pianist—his technique virtuosic, his powers of invention and improvisation remarkable—Michael is considerably accomplished additionally as a singer and player of a wide gamut of non-traditional instruments outside the Western tradition. Add to that his considerable skills, experience, activity and output as a composer, arranger and conductor and the term 'complete musician' seems particularly appropriate and pertinent for describing Mr. Smolens.

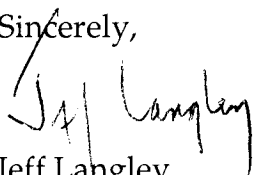
It is as a teacher, however, that Mr. Smolens is perhaps most gifted and motivated. Many a fine Bay Area musician can trace some piece of their development to valuable time spent in Mr. Smolens' East Bay studio which has become a kind of pedagogical landmark if only for the sheer breadth of his teaching approach which extends far beyond the principal instrument of study to every conceivable aspect of the student's musicianship—ear training, theory, composition, arranging, skills in active listening, singing, improvisation, playing as part of an ensemble, creative approaches to practicing—and on and on. Michael has a unique gift of "deconstructing" the individual musician in such a way as to nurture and bring forward that musician's individual voice and talent. His positive, insightful approach has helped many a student expand their idea of their musical identity and potential to a broader vision often world's removed from what they originally imagined. With complete seriousness and respect I would say that, as a teacher, Michael Smolens has many of the gifts of a guru and prophet.

Michael is a skilled communicator—he knows what he’s after from a student or a rehearsal and he has a highly effective way of conveying his objectives and intentions to his students. His classes are organized and well-planned; his students always know where they stand and what is expected of them. Michael has a natural ability to inspire and bring out the best in students, this perhaps the most important mark of any good teacher.

Collegial and collaborative by nature, Michael is a joy to know and work with. He has given of himself in countless ways to our department—as a musician in student performances and productions, as a coach and advisor for student recitals and special projects, and as a role-model of a working musician and teacher to be looked up to and admired by all.

In short, I would recommend Michael Smolens without reservation to any school, individual or ensemble fortunate enough to cross his path.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Langley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Jeff Langley
Chair, Department of Music